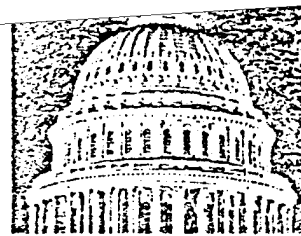


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Editor's Page



## WHERE IT NEVER LEAKS

BY HOWARD FLIEGER

The people of Great Britain are as zealously proud of their democratic liberties as Americans are of their own.

Which brings up the subject of "leaks."

The commotion in this country about what Government agents have or have not been doing in secret could never happen in the same way across the Atlantic.

The very idea of unauthorized and anonymous disclosures of official confidences is unthinkable to British politicians, bureaucrats, or journalists and their editors.

Leaks about the CIA, the FBI and other agencies of Government have been making headlines here for weeks. The Administration accuses Congress of leaking confidences given to its committees. Some congressmen accuse the Administration of secretly leaking its own documents to make Congress appear untrustworthy, and maybe unpatriotic.

Nothing said on this page condones official wrongdoing in any way. If a Government agency tries to cover up a blooper, it should, and must, be exposed. The British have had their share of official scandals, and malefactors punished. But the point is they have a different way of dealing with such things while safeguarding their national well-being.

That's why the rash of leaks in this country bewilders Britons.

For one thing, Britain has an Official Secrets Act to protect its security. But even if there were no such law, the British feel strongly about keeping official secrets, and they accept the need to do so.

The British press co-operates in a system to shelter the national interest. Its representatives are active members of a Government-sponsored committee that from time to time issues "D-notices" advising the media not to publicize certain classified matters such as military developments, intelligence operations, etc.

These notices are faithfully respected. They are never used to suppress political and eco-

nomic information that the Government might prefer to cover up as embarrassing.

Nevertheless, the sort of leaks currently rampant in Washington—those involving intelligence activities particularly—simply are things not done in Britain.

A British civil servant, even a retired one, found guilty of revealing secrets learned in the course of his official duties almost surely would wind up in jail. This certainly would be so had he been engaged in intelligence work.

A member of Parliament who leaked any information received in confidence would face being held in contempt of Parliament, and perhaps something more punitive.

British politicians—and the public—would consider it the depth of dishonor for a member of Parliament to slip to some reporter information relating to secrets concerning a national security matter. This would be especially so if it happened that Parliament as a whole questioned the wisdom of making the information public, such as the U.S. House of Representatives has just done.

Also, if it were possible the leak could be harmful to the national interest, no reputable newspaper would touch it.

Obviously, direct parallels cannot be drawn between America and Britain. The constitutional systems are different. The British parliamentary majority actually is an arm of the Government. No Prime Minister can remain as the nation's chief executive if Parliament turns against him and casts a vote of no confidence in his administration.

Still it is noteworthy that the British—if anything, more jealous of their democratic freedoms than we are—take it for granted that the Government must protect vital secrets. No individual, no member of Parliament, cabinet officer or civil servant, has the latitude to decide on his own what is a secret worthy of official protection and what is a secret he feels free to divulge, either openly or by leak.